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Supervising the C.I.A.

The case of the Singapore bribe attempt raises serious questions about the Central Intelligence Agency and its role in American foreign policy.

Initially, the State Department flatly denied Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's disclosure that in 1960 a C.I.A. agent had offered him a bribe to cover up an unsuccessful C.I.A. effort to penetrate Singapore's intelligence service. Only after Mr. Lee released a 1961 letter of apology from Secretary Rusk—and threatened to put incriminating tape recordings on Radio Singapore—did the State Department's embarrassed spokesman confirm the incident.

The spokesman explained that the State Department officials responsible for the initial denial were not fully aware of "the background" of the incident. And the C.I.A., as The Times diplomatic correspondent Max Frankel reported yesterday, "apparently relayed the denial of wrong-doing that it customarily issues to the rest of the Government when confronted by such charges."

All this is dismally reminiscent of the false State Department denials in the 1960 U-2 case that broke up the Paris summit conference with Russia. After the Bay of Pigs disaster, President Kennedy ordered new procedures established to assure that the State Department would be adequately informed of C.I.A. activities so that it could exercise policy supervision. The Killian watchdog committee, originally appointed by President Eisenhower, was revived, given a far more vigorous role and, in 1963, placed under the chairmanship of former White House adviser Clark Clifford.

Evidently some or all these safeguards have now broken down. What is most disturbing is not the certain damage done in Singapore, but the possibility of more serious delinquencies. The country can no longer be sure that either the State Department or the White House is exercising the requisite supervision over an agency about which the public knows almost nothing at all.

The Clifford committee evidently is already looking into the case. A Congressional investigation is also in order. Congressional supervision of the nation's intelligence activities is obviously inadequate. A joint committee, similar to that which watches over atomic energy, has been urged by many members of Congress; it is badly needed.

Serious damage has been done to American relations with many governments by C.I.A. activities in the past, particularly in Asia. In Jakarta last Spring, President Sukarno and many members of his cabinet were reading a new American book, "The Invisible Government," and using its confirmation of C.I.A. intervention in the 1958 Sumatra uprising to justify their hostility to the West and increasing friendship with Communist China. Similar hostility exists in Burma and Cambodia. It is vital that Washington establish the kind of firm supervision of the C.I.A. that can prevent such blunders in the future.

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